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**Challenging the Myth of the Universal Teacher:  
An Examination of the Experiences of  
African American Women Post-Secondary Mathematics Teachers**

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**Abstract: This study examines the experiences of a group of African American women mathematics teachers to see what common themes emerge. The findings reveal that the race and gender of these teachers affect their teaching-learning environment.**

**Purpose**

Webster defines a myth as "a belief that is given uncritical acceptance by the members of a group especially in support of existing or traditional practices and institutions" (1976, p. 1497). Using the criteria set forth in this definition, it was concluded that a myth of the universal teacher exists in the mainstream adult education writings on teaching adults because there is no exploration of if or how the race and gender of the teacher influences the learning environment (Apps, 1991; Barer-Stein & Draper, 1993; Brookfield, 1986; Daloz, 1986; Knowles, 1986; Knox, 1980; Lenz, 1982; Seaman & Fellenz, 1989). The myth of a universal teacher would lead one to believe that all teachers enter the teaching-learning environment on equal terms and that adult educators could teach anyone, anywhere, anything any time if they follow the guidelines set forth in books on teaching adult learners.

However, in the discussions of the plight of African American women in higher education it is evident that African American women occupy a marginal place in the academy (Gregory, 1995; James & Farmer, 1993; Moses, 1989). Therefore, African American women carry not only the baggage of double jeopardy, being a woman and an African American in our society, but also endure the negative bias that this positionality brings to the academy and into the teaching-learning environment.

This is complicated further by the field of mathematics which brings with it additional race and gender biases. Evidence documents problems associated with stereotypes surrounding race and gender in the field of mathematics. Assumptions regarding the alleged competency or incompetency of one group over another again question the accuracy of the myth for an African American woman who teaches mathematics. The research on race, gender, and mathematics shows that African American women mathematics teachers enter the classroom amidst many stereotypes relating to race, gender, and mathematics (Cross & Slater, 1994; Rakow, 1991; Secada, Fennema, & Adajian, 1995; Vetter, 1994). Consequently, African American women post-secondary mathematics teachers by virtue of teaching in a white male dominated field of mathematics occupy an even more marginal position in the academy (Rosser 1995; Sokoloff, 1992).

The reason that the myth of the universal teacher has existed is that of the accepted invisibility of African American women's teaching experiences and those of other marginalized groups. Therefore it was imperative that examinations take place of how the everyday teaching practices of African American women mathematics teachers and the rationales underlying those practices conform to the myth of the universal teacher. The purpose of this study was to understand how the classroom experiences of African American women who teach mathematics to adults perpetuate or transcend the myth of the universal teacher. The research was guided by the question of what common themes emerge in the classroom experiences of African American women who teach mathematics to adults?

**Research Design**

As an African American woman mathematics teacher, I judged that it was essential to conduct this research through a Black feminist perspective; that is to engage in "theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (Collins, 1991, p. 22).

A qualitative design with interviewing and observing as its primary methodological tools was used. The purposeful sample consisted of seven African American women ages 30-45 from four southeastern states who taught mathematics at either a technical school or a community college. They were interviewed and then observed teaching mathematics to adults. Following the classroom observations, another interview took place to discuss what occurred in the participant's classroom.

### Findings and Conclusions

The data reveal themes surrounding these African American adult educators' teaching philosophies, credibility, teacher-student interactions, and teaching practices. These themes were interrelated in that teaching philosophies, issues related to credibility, and teacher-student interactions, all of which were informed by their race and gender, influenced the teaching practices of these adult educators.

These African American women mathematics teachers had a teaching philosophy based on the marginality that they experienced as learners in the mathematics classroom and accordingly their goal became the promotion of equity in the mathematics classroom. Each had a different story to tell about their experiences as learners and it became apparent in their narratives about their teaching experiences that their past histories as marginalized learners - African American women- has helped them to develop teaching philosophies that seek to reach all, even those mathematics learners who are considered to be on the margin, and to incite their students to become productive learners.

Annie articulated her philosophy as follows: "a teacher's main objective should be to motivate, to stimulate, to activate." Annie felt that her teachers had not stimulated her to growth and at times she spoke of not being interested in learning but in partying. As she talked Annie had a look of regret on her face. Annie summed up her feelings by saying

They [her teaching philosophies and practices] come from me sitting down and saying, that shit didn't work for me. What do I think will work? Let me think of something that will work. Why would I do this . . . where would I . . . So I've actually put myself in a student position.

Annie's philosophy was a result of her wanting more from her teachers and not getting it and therefore she seeks to meet her students' needs. Addie believes that a teacher should make students feel good about themselves and their ability to learn and then teach them life long learning skills. As a result of her marginalization and experiences, Georgia believes that everybody can learn and she recognizes that the degree of their learning and style of their learning may be different from hers. Therefore, she expressed her teaching philosophy this way, "it is my job to give them the time, patience, environment, teaching, and attitude that they may learn." Ethel used these words to sum up her teaching philosophy, "Everybody is capable of learning to a certain level, and we've just got to challenge them, work with them until they reach the level that we feel they can aspire to." It was evident that Ethel's philosophy would include the belief that the teacher should work with the students to help them achieve especially in light of her own aloneness in the classroom.

Consequently, the combined effect of each teacher's vast range of social experiences, interpreted differently for each of them, has resulted in the standards they uphold and the goals that they promote. Moreover, the teaching philosophies of these African American women shared some similarities. All of the women felt that they were the instruments that bridged students to lifelong learning. Their philosophies also shared the commonality of motivating students. All of their philosophies were aimed at reaching everyone and bringing them to the center of the learning environment. This was a direct influence of their cultures which was affected by their marginalization. Their marginalization was a consequence of their race and gender. The philosophies that govern these African American women post-secondary mathematics teachers classrooms are directly influenced by their past conditions,

relationships, and perceptions. As a result of their marginality in previous classrooms as learners and in some cases their marginality in society, these adult educators seek to empower all and not to marginalize any of their students. Overall these African American women educators had a philosophy that is comprised of reaching those who are marginalized and bringing them to the center alongside those who are already privileged to be there.

As a result of these African American women adult educators teaching in a nontraditional field they have to deal with many issues related to credibility. Therefore, one of their defense mechanisms is a strong sense of who they are and their excellence in teaching. In spite of this self confidence they work hard to establish credibility in their mathematics classroom. All but one of these educators believed that because of their race and gender credibility that was automatically given to their White male colleagues was not afforded to them. They each have developed strategies for assessing their credibility.

Drawing on their experiences as learners these African American educators realized that it was important how teachers and students interact and how students are treated in the classroom. Their teacher-student interactions were influenced by student expectations relating to the race and gender of the teacher along with these teachers' desire to facilitate equity in the mathematics classroom. These African American women mathematics teachers have to deal with resistant, challenging learners because of who they are and what they teach. Therefore, all of their narratives depict their active stance and extended effort in developing positive teacher-student interactions. These actions include affirming minorities and valuing diverse ways of learning. However, observations of the classes of Ethel and Annie reveal that these women sometimes fall short of their goals and reinforce the patriarchal hierarchy that exists in society.

As these women spoke of what they do in their mathematics classrooms, they referred to the practices of their own teachers and their experiences as learners. In the narratives and classroom observations of these African American women it became apparent that they exhibited an experiential mode of teaching based on the ways that their teachers had taught them and interacted with them. Some of these adult educators' former teachers recognized their abilities or gave them opportunities to determine their aptitude. Other former teachers laid the burden of their own prejudice, racism, and sexism on them. If these African American women educators perceived that a strategy used or a behavior exhibited by a former teacher was effective in reaching them, then they modeled that strategy or behavior. However, if a former teacher displayed a teaching practice or behavior that was inhibitive to their learning, then these African American women mathematics teachers modified it to produce a teaching strategy that would aid students in the learning process. All of these mathematics teachers mentioned gaps in accessibility to certain information during through their own educational journey.

From the experiential base that these African American women post-secondary mathematics teachers draw upon to inform their teaching practices, they have developed practices that contain two major focuses-- accessibility and the empowerment of learners. Four elements-- experiences as learners, teaching philosophies, issues relating to credibility, and teacher-student interactions-- are informed by these African American women adult educators' race and gender. Their teaching philosophies, issues related to credibility, and their teacher-student interactions also influenced their teaching practices. So consequently their race and gender influence their teaching practices.

These African American women mathematics teachers sought to engage the entire class in the learning process and not just those which society says are mathematically elite. These adult educators made learning mathematics accessible by focusing on the learner through interactive lessons that emphasized input and feedback from the students. Student ownership of the learning process was integral in their way of promoting positive learning experiences.

Another key avenue of these African American women mathematics teachers' mission to make mathematics accessible is flexibility. Each teacher felt that flexibility was necessary to reach divergent ranges of student needs and abilities. Each teacher recognized that each student had something to bring to the learning environment and made room for differences among their student populations. These teachers typically deviated from the traditional male norm of the teacher as the omniscient center of knowledge and the learner in a passive role.

In each of the narratives and classroom observations, it was obvious that these African American women teachers felt that modeling behaviors was key to making mathematics accessible. They not only modeled behaviors that were appropriate for mathematics, but ones which were appropriate for lifelong learning across varying situations.

The climate in which the learning process took place was seen by these African American women post-secondary mathematics teachers as another important avenue of accessibility. Annie said, "I try to put as much energy and pizzazz in my class to make it come alive . . . . Most importantly what I want is for my students to be comfortable." Addie declared, "students should be in a supportive environment and that's why I try to affirm them." Ethel professed, "I want my students to be in an environment that is non-threatening." Reba remarked, "I want my students to be engaged in the classroom dynamics." Georgia proclaimed, "students should feel supported in the classroom."

Drawing from their own memories as learners, these adult educators found it necessary to empower their students not only with sufficient knowledge of mathematical skills but also emotionally. As a result of their own experiences in the mathematics classrooms, they knew that it was not enough for a teacher to stress a high level of mastery of mathematical skills. They believed that a teacher must also empower students with the mental attitude and confidence about learning. Because each of these women felt that they were the most successful when teachers not only encouraged them but prepared them for future challenges, they in turn try to empower their students. These mathematics teachers also had teachers who they felt hindered them from being successful in the classroom as well as in further endeavors and because of these negative influences these adult educators work hard to inspire their students to learn. These African American women educators want students to know that they can learn. Moreover, these teachers want their students to be stimulated to seek learning for a lifetime in addition to seeing the value of what they are learning through the course content.

These adult educators also realize that their learners are human and as such do not exist in a vacuum and in numerous instances have many dilemmas to juggle in their educational tenure. As such these African American women work on educating the whole student and not just teaching mathematics. These educators spoke often of counseling their learners, getting learners to value themselves, building self-esteem among their learners, and the development of their students' ability to learn mathematics.

It was evident in their narratives and in the observations of their classrooms that students must perceive that learning has a purpose. The avenues through which this component manifested itself were connected learning and going beyond the mathematical content. All of these African American women adult educators supported the teaching not only of mathematical concepts for mastery of high levels of competency but also the basics of how to learn and connect mathematics to their individual lives.

Consequently, the classroom experiences of these African American women teachers is a direct result of their experiences as African Americans and women in society. Because of who they are these African American women post-secondary mathematics teachers do not have prescriptive teaching practices but draw upon their own experiences to facilitate positive learning experiences for their students while combating negative credibility issues and teacher-student interactions. Throughout their interviews and classroom observations the impact of their race and gender on the learning environment was abundantly present.

As this study accounts for the experiences of a group of African American women adult educators, the visibility of their experiences raises serious concerns about the validity of the myth of the universal teacher. This study illustrates several experiences of African American women post-secondary mathematics teachers that are not universal. Major conclusions from these findings are: (1) the race and gender of these teachers affect their teaching-learning environment and (2) the myth of the universal teacher is inaccurate because not all of the experiences of these African American women mathematics teachers are universal. There are no generic teachers in the teaching learning environment, but there are teachers whose experiences are affected positively or negatively by their race and gender.

### Implications

This study contributes to gaps in theory on teaching adults and facilitating adult learning because it documents the influence that the race and gender of a teacher can have on the teaching learning environment. The findings of this

study serve as a starting point to show that no prescriptive practice can transcend the impact of the race and gender of the teacher on the teaching learning environment when that teacher is not of the dominant race and gender and teaching in a field populated by those who are.

Although teaching guidelines are important areas to consider when working with adults, this study indicates that the race and gender of the teacher are also factors to be considered when planning instruction for adults. If the race and gender of these African American women affected their teaching practices separately or together it is therefore a logical extension of this position to propose that the race and gender of other educators, whether they are members of disenfranchised groups or the powerful majority group, would also affect their practices. This effect might either privilege or negatively impact their practices. Furthermore, this study challenges the field of adult education to move away from the notion of the universal teacher and to focus more on how the distinct characteristics of the individual teacher should be considered in the planning process.

Also, this study challenges practitioners to examine how their race and gender impact their teaching practices and beliefs. This study also has implications for those people who are not African American women who teach mathematics. The fact that the race and gender of the teacher does affect the learning-environment is not an experience unique to African American women adult educators or others who are a member of a nondominant race and gender. Everybody has a race and a gender. Therefore they bring a race and a gender into the classroom regardless of who they are or what they teach.

Furthermore, the experiences of the African American women adult educators in this study offer many strategies for achieving equity and attacking injustices in the mathematics classroom. Their pedagogies are rich with material for those concerned with exploring creative alternatives for more equitable learning, and their experiences are vehicles that can help us posit poignant questions about the nature of our own identities. These strategies can also direct adult educators to methods that can make their own classrooms more equitable regardless of the course content. This includes sensitizing them to the fact that more equity may be needed in their classrooms.

Finally, in my attempt to bring the experiences of a group of adult educators teaching from the margins to the forefront I have challenged the myth of the universal teacher. This provides a much needed beginning and opens the door for more critical dialogue about how the race and gender of the teacher might affect the teaching-learning environment. Hopefully, with this significant attention and practical inquiry into how the race and gender of the teacher affects the teaching-learning environment not only will many more studies of this nature be conducted but also true learning and positive change will occur with adult educators examining their own practices and adjusting them as needed to produce more equitable classrooms for those who are not privileged by our present educational system.

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